Mark D. Chapman, Doing Good: Religion and Public Policy in Brown's Britain; and Robert W. Lovin, Christian Realism and the New Realities

Doing God: Religion and Public Policy in Brown's Britain, Mark D. Chapman (Darton, Longman & Todd 2008), viii+150 pp, £11.95 pbk

Christian Realism and the New Realities, Robin W. Lovin (Cambridge University Press 2008), viii+231 pp, £45/$90 hbk; £17.99/$29.99 pbk

In Britain today, Mark Chapman convincingly argues, politicians' promotion of community values is contradictory. Local democracy and accountability are celebrated, but driven by the policies, standards, targets and auditing of central government. Examples include NHS reform, schools and relaxing pub licensing laws, in which the principle of citizenship has been largely replaced by that of consumption and local people have frequently had little or no real say in decisions. Chapman looks to the churches for a new polity founded on a truly bottom-up and thus countercultural notion of community. He does not recognise, however, that churches have themselves endured similar processes, with a rhetoric of enabling and empowering local communities disguising only thinly the progressive removal of historic local automony through pastoral reorganisation, centralising patronage, withdrawing clergy freehold, multiplying ordained management roles and bureaucratising formation and ministry.

While Anglicans have been supinely surrendering these dearly-won historic local privileges, Islamic communities have shot to public prominence as a new, energised locally-based religion. They have challenged, Chapman shows, the comfortable compromise of classic multiculturalism that permitted religious groups to inhabit public space providing they accepted its neutrality and operated essentially in private. They have also prompted Christians to think through the countercultural aspects of their own faith more clearly. These are developed in chapters five and six, in which Rowan Williams' theology of 'interactive' or 'constructive' pluralism is illuminatingly analysed, placing in context his widely-reported and generally misunderstood 2008 lecture on sharia law. Politically, he sees the state as mediator and 'space-maker' rather than sovereign. Williams' political theology evidently informs his current approach to divisive issues

like the place of gay people in the Anglican Communion and women bishops in the Church of England.

Robin Lovin offers an informative history of Christian realism followed by an appraisal of its contemporary state and prospects. His book's opening two chapters perform the first task engagingly, sketching three loci of political realism, moral realism and theological realism that a Christian realist combines. Deep historical roots are traced back to Augustine, and Lovin shows just how the wrong the assumption of classic liberal theorists that the modern state would naturally be secular and command subjects' total obedience has turned out to be.

Having previously written on Niebuhr, Lovin draws on Bonhoeffer in later chapters to develop a brand of realism less at risk than Niebuhr's of amicable compromise with secularism and American liberal democratic values. Particularly refreshing is the wide conception of politics he sketches, located in several interlocking spheres, orders, contexts, places of responsibility, or following Bonhoeffer, mandates: work, family, government, church and culture. Unless God's commandment is received concretely in these spheres, it remains 'weak ideology'. Readers who persevere through these later chapters will realise that the issues addressed emerge from contradictions particular to the United States, where a secular constitution confronts a deeply Christian society. In Britain, where vestiges persist of the medieval notion of the sovereign embodying a mystical union of earth, throne and altar, the history and presenting questions are different.

David Grumett, University of Exeter

Contemplating God, Changing the World, Mario I. Aguilar (SPCK 2008), xxiii+164 pp, £12.99 pbk

Mystics are disruptive people. Fired by a love not of this world, they frequently refuse to play by the rules of society or church and are difficult to control. As a result, they are rarely deemed suitable for high civil or ecclesiastical office, but their charismatic witness often gains them fame and respect nonetheless. Mystics are highly imaginative, seeing the world in a new light that reveals what it could become when transformed by Christ and how their own witness might contribute to that transformation.

In this readable and accessible survey, Mario Aguilar introduces six such people. Thomas Merton joined the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941 when the monks still slept clothed in dormitories and fasted for half the year. At one point he sought to leave and was emotionally involved with a young woman, but later settled in a hermitage in the grounds where he was able to integrate his prayer life with scholarship and hospitality. In 1968 he met the Dalai Lama and they explored common interests including vegetarianism, and social and economic Marxism.

Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest who became Culture Minister in the Sandinista government, had earlier read Merton and Ezra Pound before joining Gethsemani in 1957. He left soon after and founded a community on the remote Solentiname Islands that came to include married people. Having become a centre for Marxist resistance to the Somoza regime, the community was razed to the ground by the National Guard in 1977.

The American Jesuit Daniel Berrigan also came under Merton's influence, attending Gethsemani on retreat in 1964. During his earlier tertianship in France he met worker-priests and later became a prime mover in the nonviolent wing of the US civil rights movement. In 1968 he was imprisoned for three years after breaking into government offices to remove draft cards and burn them with napalm. During the protest, he was filmed by assembled media singing the Lord's Prayer.

Three more recent figures complete this sextet: Dr Shelia Cassidy, arrested and tortured in Chile by General Pinochet's security forces after helping to treat Nelson Gutiérrez, a revolutionary shot in the leg; Desmond Tutu, bishop of Lesotho then Archbishop of Cape Town and a prime promoter of the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Blessed Mother Teresa, the Albanian nun who spent a lifetime caring for the poor in the slums of Calcutta regardless of their faith, forging some contentious alliances which led to press criticism.

Aguilar sees the eucharist as the common bond sustaining all these people. Shelia Cassidy consumed a small piece of the host every morning. Desmond Tutu asked for a daily eucharist in every parish of his archdiocese. Mother Teresa's day opened with the eucharist. In his concluding chapters, Aguilar offers practical guidance on how the eucharist and contemplation generally may nurture all Christians and orient them to action. Although not all readers will feel called to interpret these in such radical terms, it is good to remember where they might ultimately lead.

David Grumett, University of Exeter